

# Early Education and Policy: How can we ensure an equal start for all?

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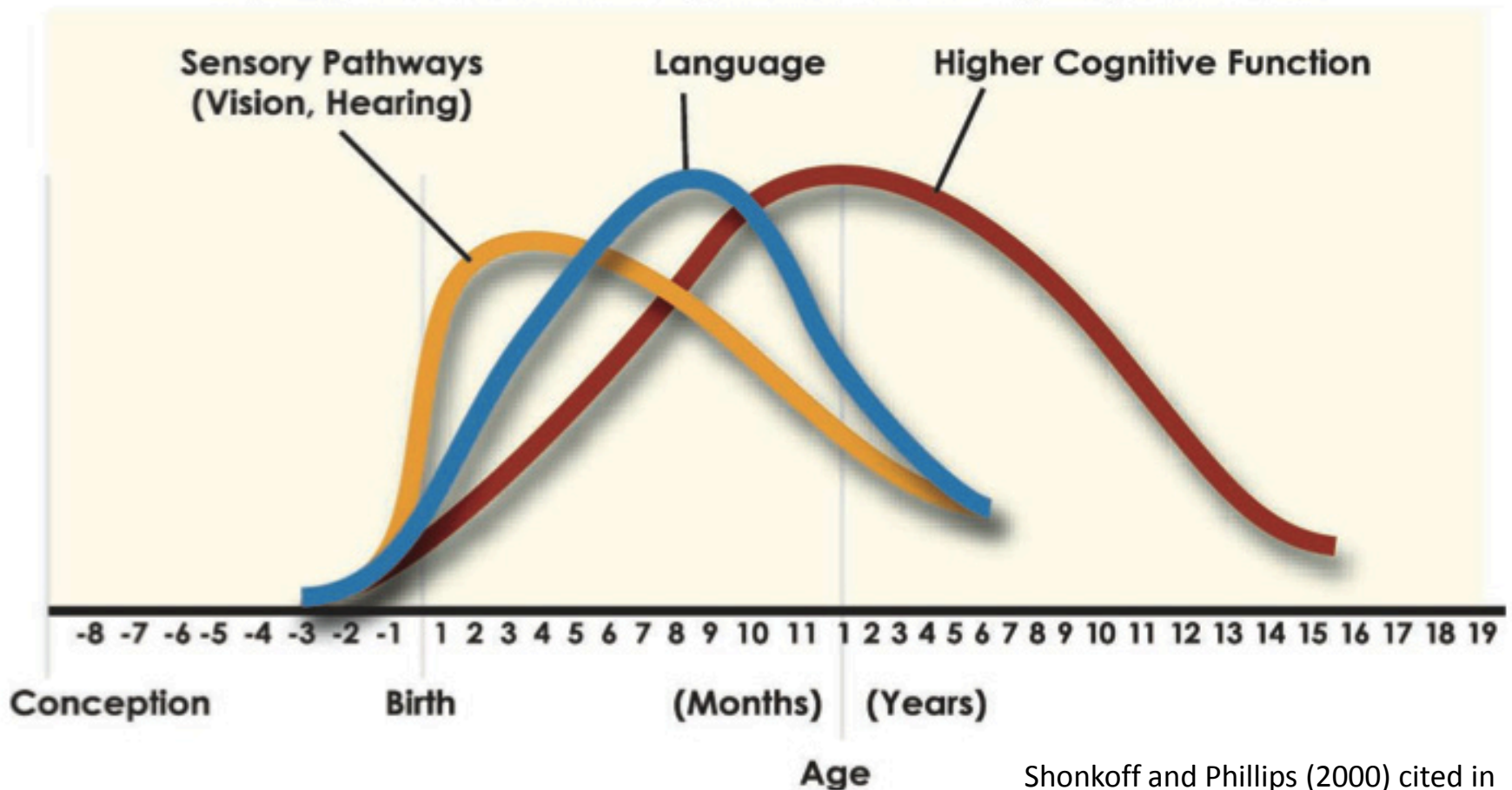
# Overview

- What do we know?
- What *don't* we know?
- Challenges and trade-offs for policy

# What do we know?

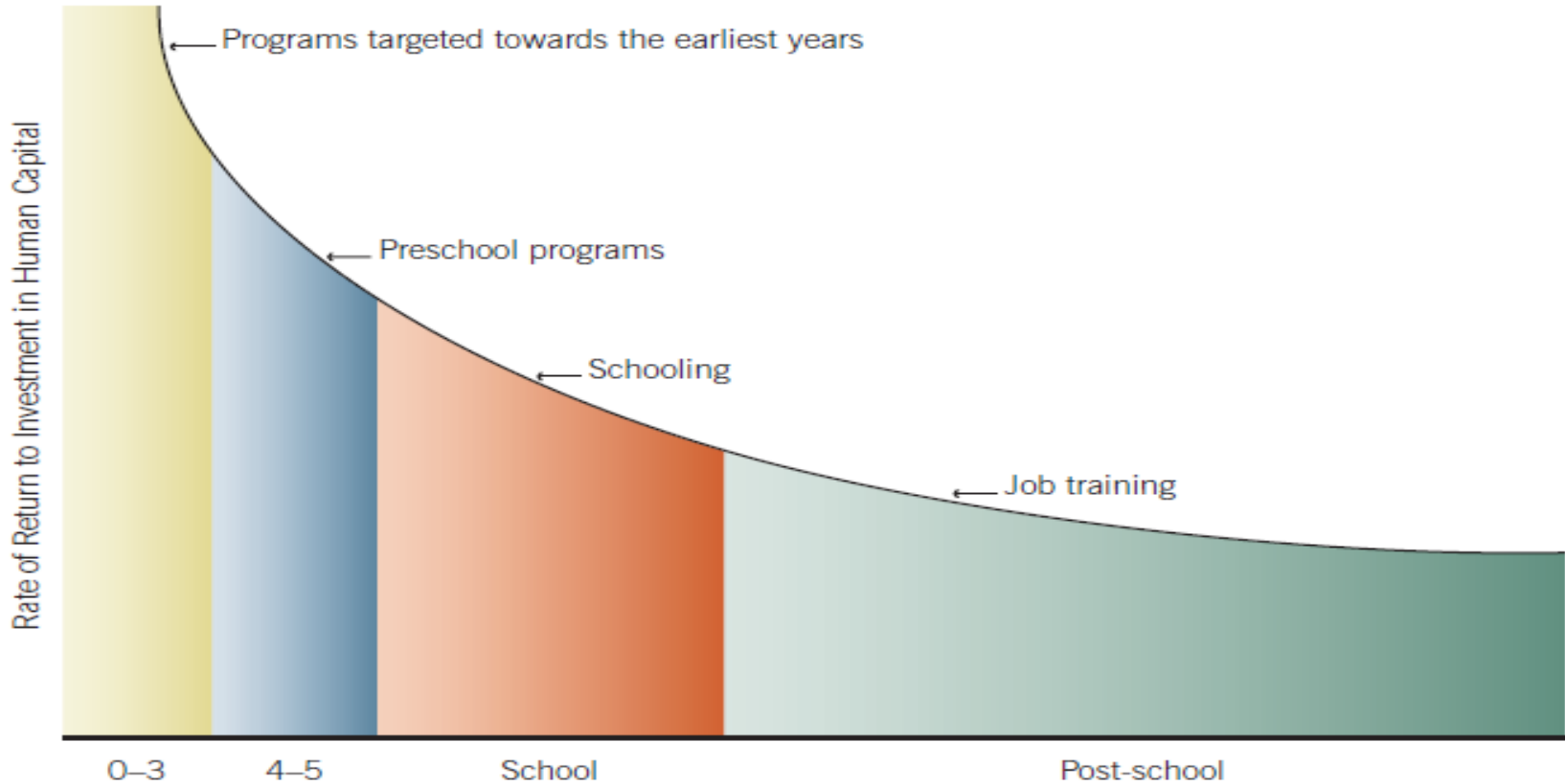
## Human Brain Development

Synapse Formation Dependent on Early Experiences



Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) cited in Winter (2010). See also OECD (2007)

*Figure 19: Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested*



Source: Heckman and LaFontaine (2007).

# The evidence on effective early education programmes (ECEC)

Melhuish et al (2015); Ulfert and Anders (2016); Van Huizen and Plantenga (2018)

- **STARTING WHEN?**

No strong evidence for starting before age 3

- **HOW MANY HOURS?**

A mixed picture

- Generally, full day found to be neither necessary nor sufficient for positive effects
- Some evidence for full-time over part-time in Van Huizen and Plantenga

- **QUALITY?**

Important!

- Staff qualifications matter
- Staff-child ratios also, but less (i.e. better to have high qualifications and medium ratios than vice versa)
- Public programmes seem to have more positive effects than private ones

- **HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS**

Clear and consistent findings

- Children with lower educated parents or immigrant parents gain most

# Early child development does not only take place in ECEC settings

- The Sure Start Children's Centre model: play and learning opportunities and parenting support from 0-5

# Early child development does not only take place in ECEC settings

- The importance of what takes place at home
- And, as a consequence, the importance of household financial resources

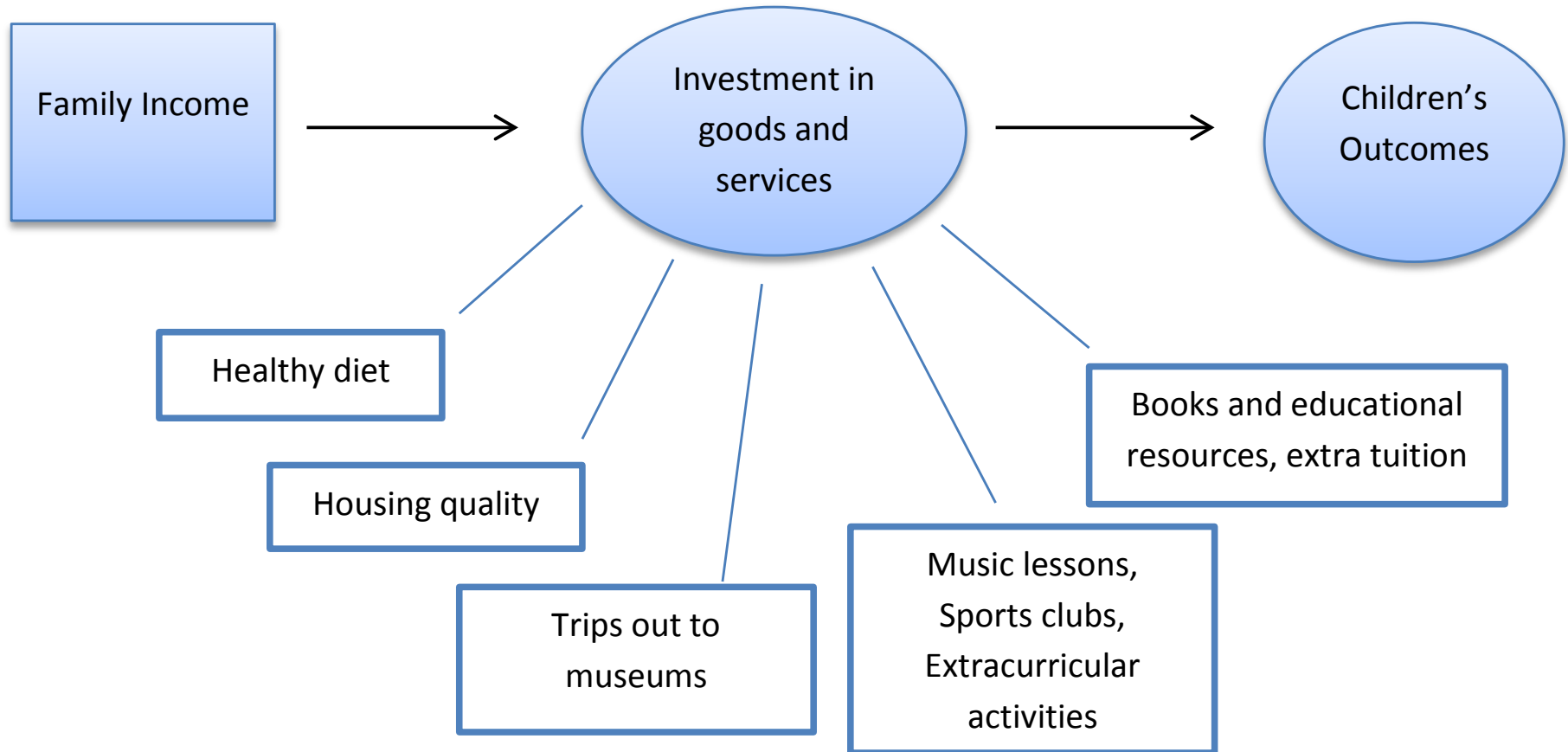
# Money matters: increases in income have positive effects on child development

- Our systematic review for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation looked at studies using robust causal methods (e.g. quasi-experimental techniques) to examine the effects of income on children's outcomes (Cooper and Stewart, 2013; 2017)
- Strong evidence of significant positive income effects on children's cognitive and social-behavioural-emotional outcomes
- *Some* evidence that these effects are greatest (especially for cognitive outcomes) among children under five.



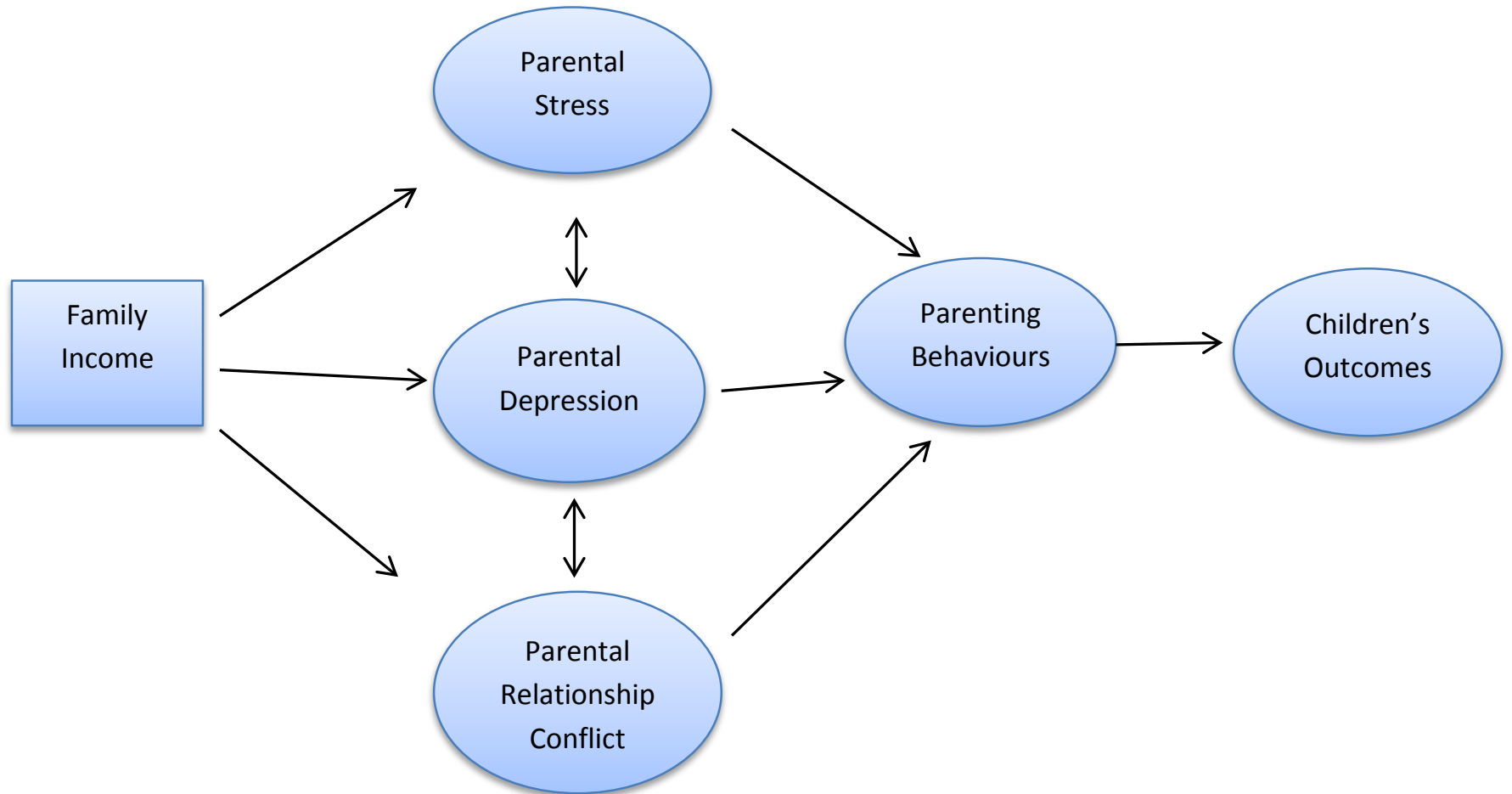
# Why does money matter?

## The Investment Model

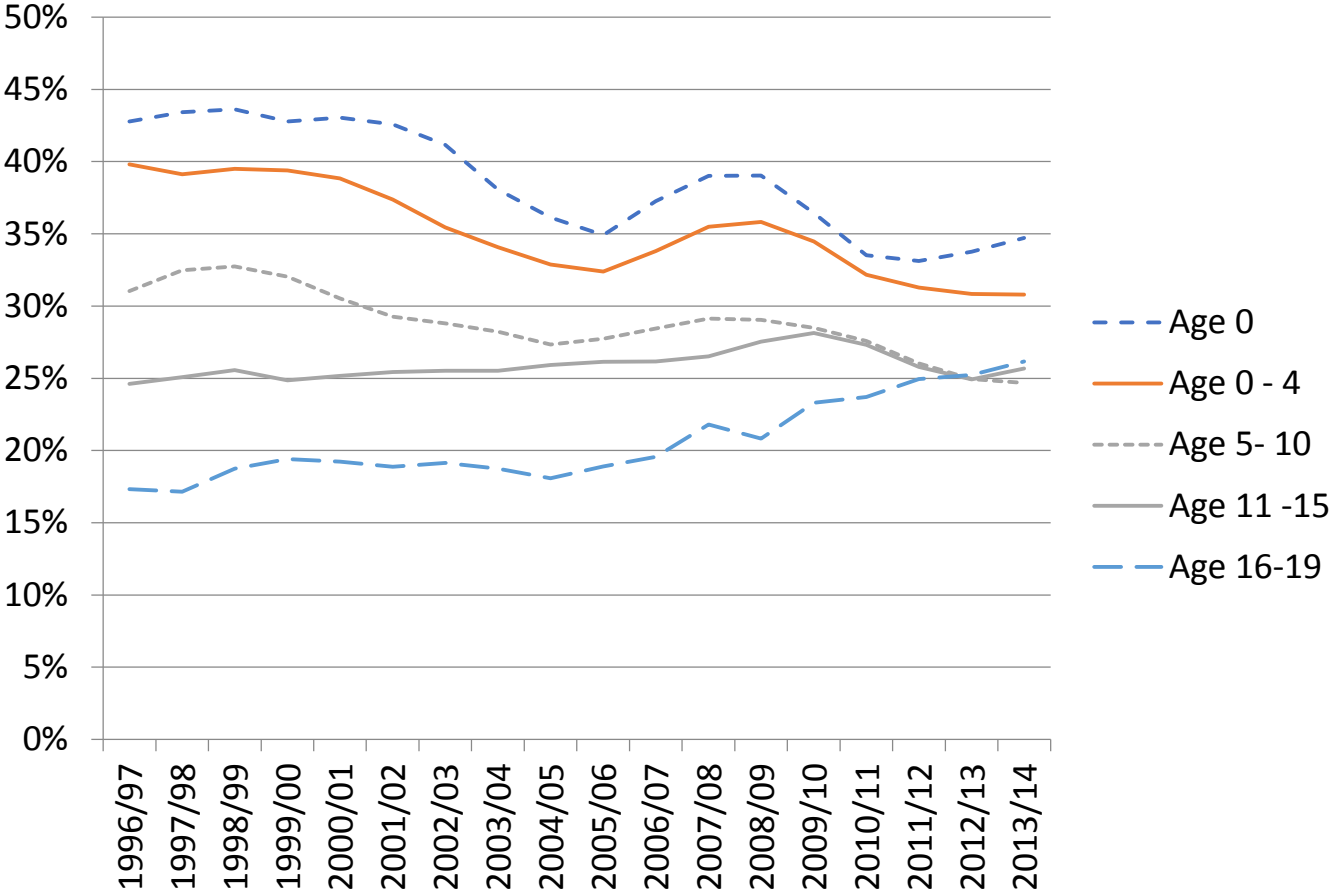


# Why does money matter?

## The Family Stress Model



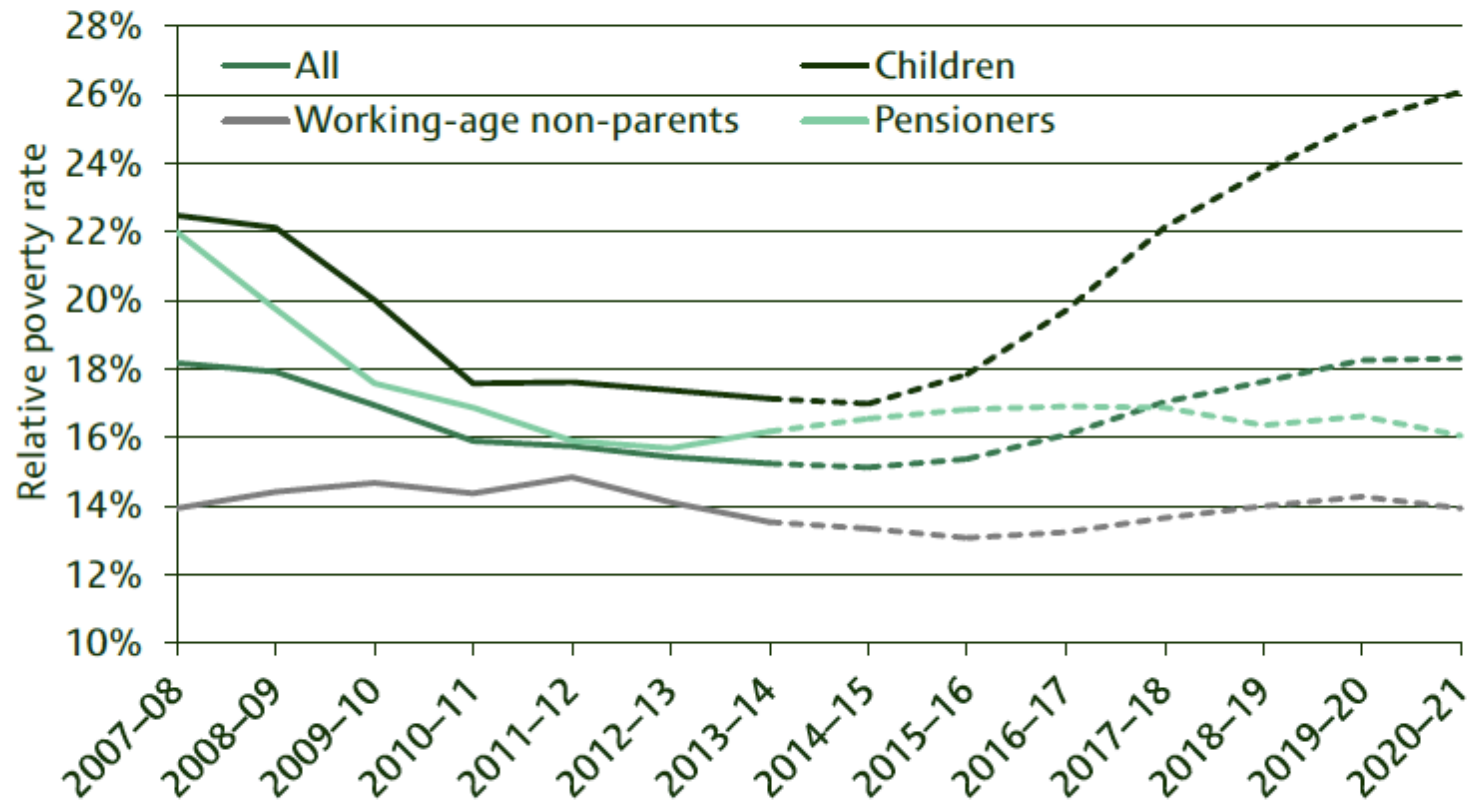
# Trends in child poverty in the UK by age of youngest child in the household



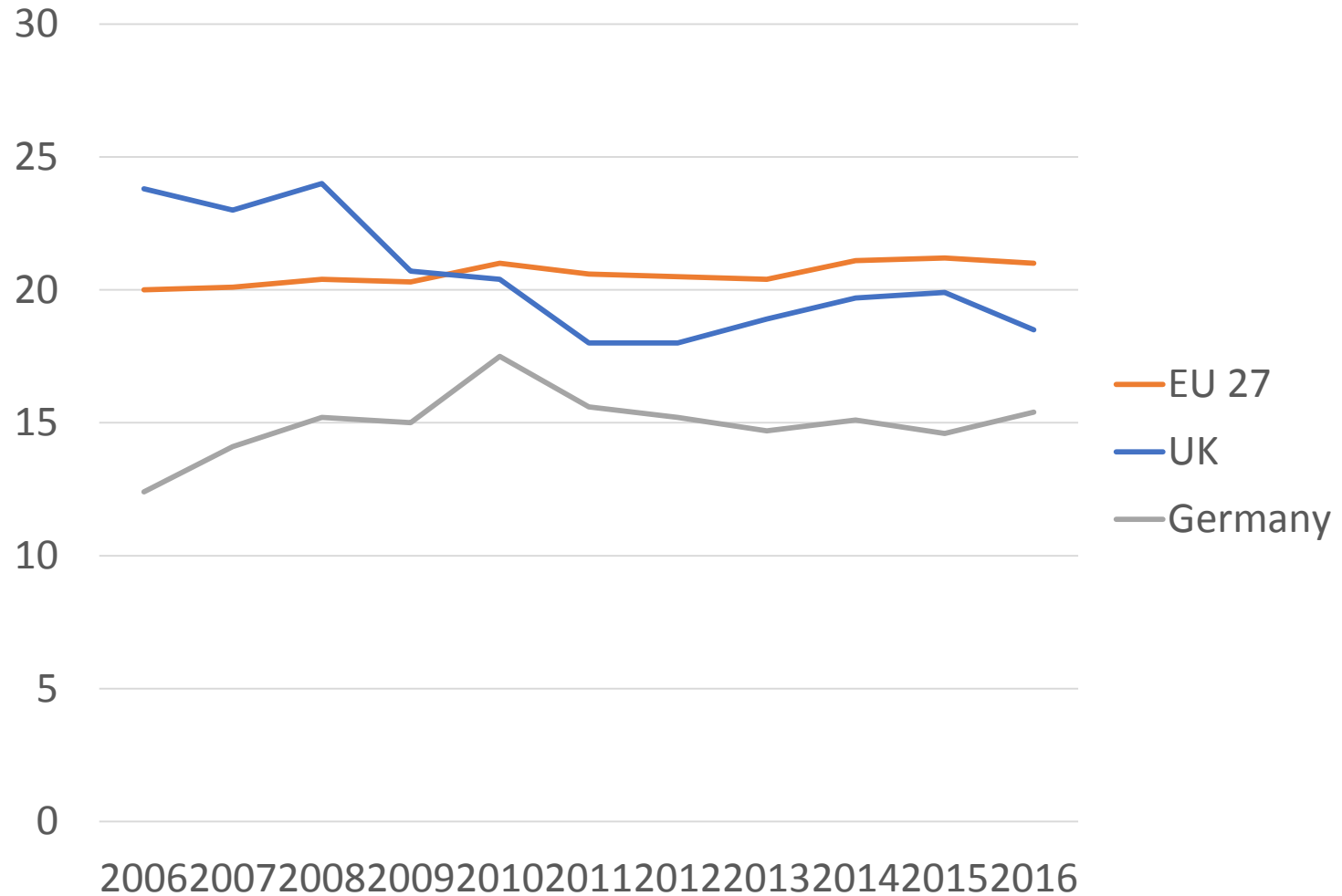
Source: Stewart and Obolenskaya (2016) in Lupton et al (eds) *Social Policy in a Cold Climate*

# Prospects for child poverty in the UK

## Relative poverty rates: 2007–08 to 2020–21



## Children living in households below 60% equivalised median income (percentage)



Source: Eurostat, using data from EU-SILC

# So what might ideal provision to create an equal start look like?

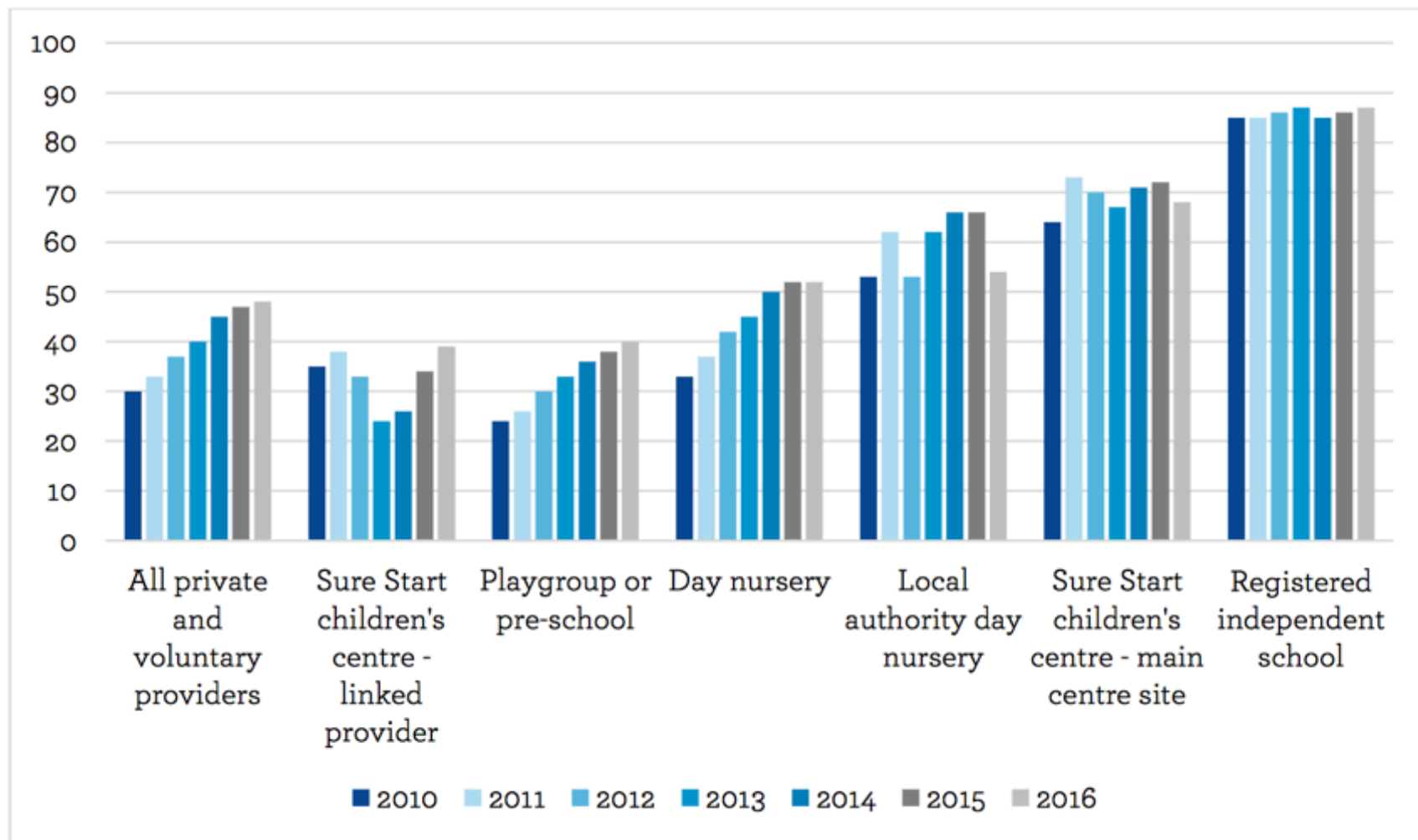
- Sufficient financial support to ensure an optimal home environment
  - Generous parental leave in the first year
  - Financial support through child benefits
  - Support for parental employment (childcare)
- Sure Start style family services providing play and learning opportunities for young children and their parents and carers
- Universal access to high quality ECEC from age three onwards *as a minimum*

# What *don't* we know? (or still aren't sure about)

- Which **staff qualifications** are best, and in which combinations?
- What **curriculum content** has the most lasting effects?
- Do **peer groups** matter?

# England: a focus on graduates (ISCED 6)

Figure 3 Percentage of funded three and four year olds attending settings where a qualified graduate (QTS/EYTS/EYPS) works directly with the children, by category of provider



Source: Stewart and Waldfogel (2017), using Department for Education data.



# England: minimum requirements remain extremely low outside state settings

- Childcare managers must have a vocational qualification at ISCED level 3
- At least half of childcare workers in a setting must have a level 2 qualification
- For staff in the room: No requirements regarding qualifications for staff working with children aged 2+
- Slightly stricter for babies: Member of staff in charge of the room must (in the judgement of the provider) have suitable experience working with under twos.

# Germany: much stronger vocational routes (at risk of being diluted?)

- Childhood/Social Pedagogues: 5% of the workforce  
(Bachelors degree)
- Educators (*Erzieherinnen*): 67%  
(intermediate secondary school leaving certificate + 3 years)
- Childcare Assistants/Social Assistants: 13%  
(secondary school leaving certificate + 1-3 years)

To cope with staff shortages: new Practice-Integrated Qualification Routes are being introduced.

“In some *Länder* a shortening of the length of initial professional studies can be observed, and also a drop in standards”.

Sigrid Ebert, in Oberhuemer and Schreyer, 2018.

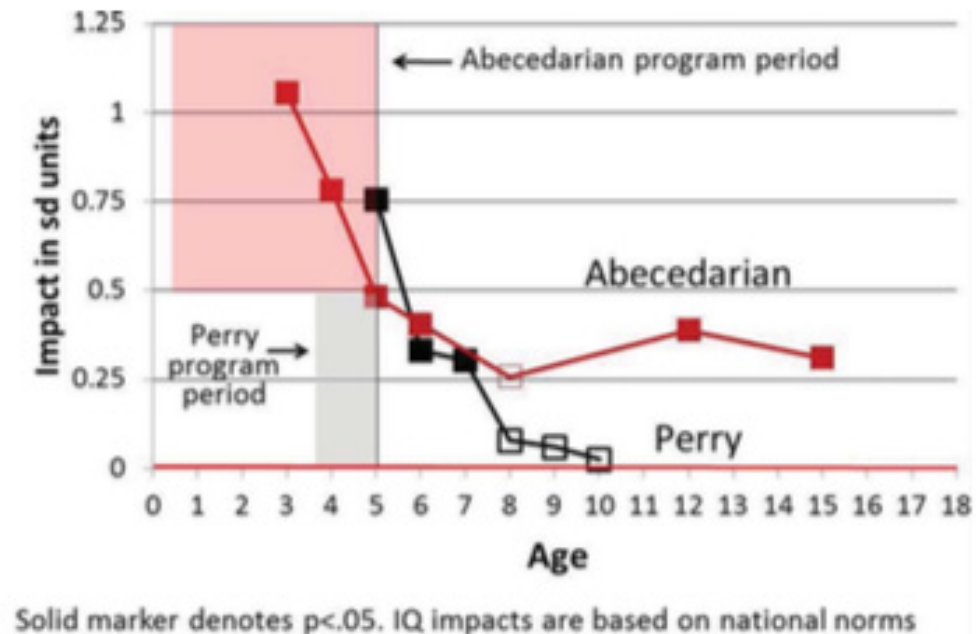
# Can staff be *over* educated?

“Our teachers have a high university level but their training, which is too intellectual, doesn’t always correspond to the child’s needs”.

Psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik, early education advisor to the French government (quoted in *The Telegraph* 27 March 2018).

# Curriculum content

The implications of “fadeout” and “sleeper” effects



**Figure 1.** IQ impacts in Perry and Abecedarian.

Source: Bailey et al (2016) 'Persistence and fadeout in intervention impacts'

	Fundamental ↔ Peripheral	
<p><b>More malleable</b></p> <p>↑</p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>Less malleable</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Math &amp; literacy</li> <li>• Self-concept, academic motivation &amp; implicit theories of intelligence</li> <li>• Emotional self-regulation &amp; executive function</li> <li>• Social and relationship skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test-specific knowledge</li> <li>• SAT test prep</li> <li>• FAFSA information</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conscientiousness (including grit)</li> <li>• General intelligence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambidexterity</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.** Fundamentality and malleability in skills, behaviors, and beliefs.

Source: Bailey et al (2016) 'Persistence and fadeout in intervention impacts'

# Do peer groups matter?

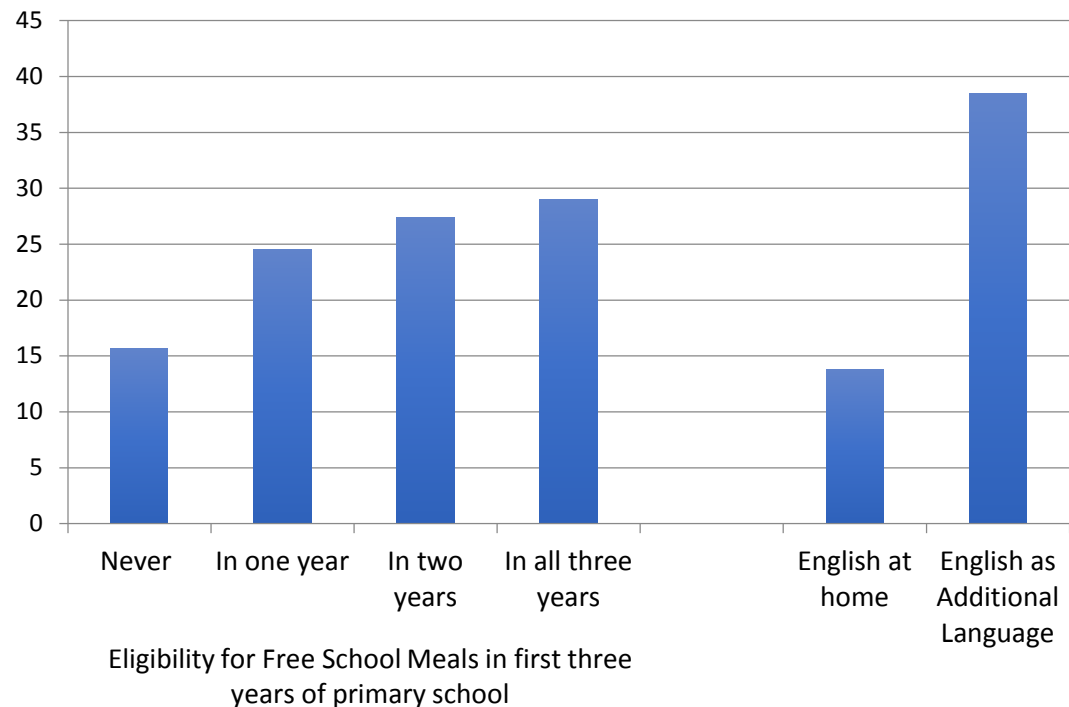
- Do children from more disadvantaged households do better in settings where children come from a wider social mix?
- Mixed evidence on impact of **language competence** among peers:
  - **US**: a number of studies suggest that children make more progress when exposed to peers with higher language competence (e.g. DeLay et al 2016; Mashburn et al 2009; Schechter & Bye, 2007; Shager, 2012)
  - **Norway**: Ribeiro et al (2017) find no peer effect in a similar study
  - **Germany**: Ebert et al (2013): small effect of peer language input for children not speaking German at home.
- And similarly mixed evidence on (related) question of **mix of peers by socio-economic background**:
  - **US**: some evidence that children from lower SES backgrounds do better when in a socially mixed environment than with high number of low SES peers (Schechter and Bye, 2007; Weiland and Yoshikawa, 2014; Miller et al, 2017)
  - **UK**: no evidence that low income children do worse in assessments at age 7 if they had relatively higher numbers of low-income peers in their early education setting (Stewart et al, 2019 forthcoming).
- Should achieving a mixed intake be seen as an aim in its own right? If part of the aim of the service is to combat social exclusion, perhaps it is important to encourage both mixed intakes, and provision that is mindful and respectful of differences.

# Policy challenges and trade-offs

## (1) Ensuring universal take-up - how to reach everyone?

- Universal programmes are pretty effective at ensuring very high levels of take-up, *but not perfect* - and often the children who miss out are those with most to gain.

England: Non take-up of free early education places (age 3) when the child first becomes eligible

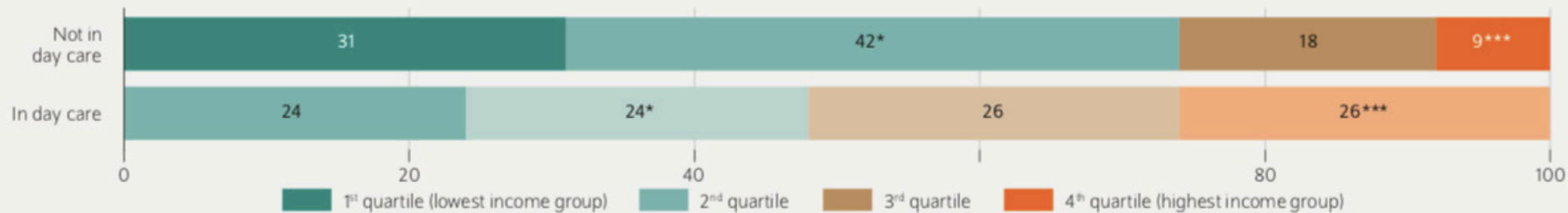


Source: Campbell et al (2018)

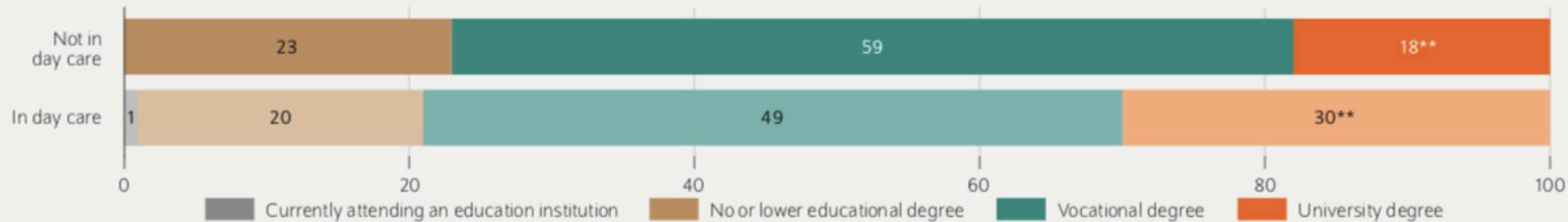
# Take-up in Germany

## Children aged three and older who do not attend day care centers also come from high-income households and households with high educational attainment

Day care center attendance of children aged three and older by household net income (percentage shares)



Day care center attendance of children aged three and older by mother's educational attainment (percentage shares)



Source: Authors' own calculations based on SOEP data.

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Source: Schmitz and Speiß (2018) DIW Weekly Report



# Universal take-up: how to reach everyone?

- Should early education be compulsory?  
(E.g. France from 2019)
- Should child benefits be made conditional on enrolment/attendance?  
(E.g. New Zealand? Hungary)
- Or can we improve take-up through education and outreach?
  - Not only about giving parents information, but also about addressing barriers to take-up - enrolment fees, lunch fees etc.
  - And about making the centre attractive and welcoming to parents
  - Campbell et al (2018): higher take-up and less inequality in take-up in local authorities that have more provision in Sure Start Children's Centres, compared to private sector provision.

# Policy challenges and trade-offs

## **(2) How to balance provision for working parents and provision to narrow inequalities in child development?**

- Many countries are shifting from a focus on childcare to meet needs of working parents to focus on quality
- UK - moving (just at the moment) in the other direction

(Why) are these goals in conflict?

- If children of working parents access longer hours, this could mean *widening* gaps in child development.
  - Not necessarily - as long as part-time provision for more disadvantaged children is **high quality** and they can (and do) access it.
- Priorities for funding (especially in an age of austerity).
  - Obvious answer - do both! But political commitment not always there - hence trade-offs.

# How to balance provision for working parents with provision that can narrow inequalities?

Ideal scenario?

- High quality part-time provision free for all
- Plus top-up provision for longer hours, with a sliding scale of fees or other subsidy.

But...

(1) Need to make sure that children of non-working parents can really access the provision and are not squeezed out.

- **England:** free part-time place guaranteed from age 3, with longer free hours for working parents, but:
  - In practice, free full day places have been reallocated away from more disadvantaged
  - And the places are inadequately funded, which is squeezing quality for all
- **Germany:** right to a place guaranteed (in principle) from age 1, but:
  - In practice, places are not always available
  - And full day providers may favour children of full-time working parents because of funding

(2) Need to make longer hours genuinely possible (available and affordable) for those who want them.

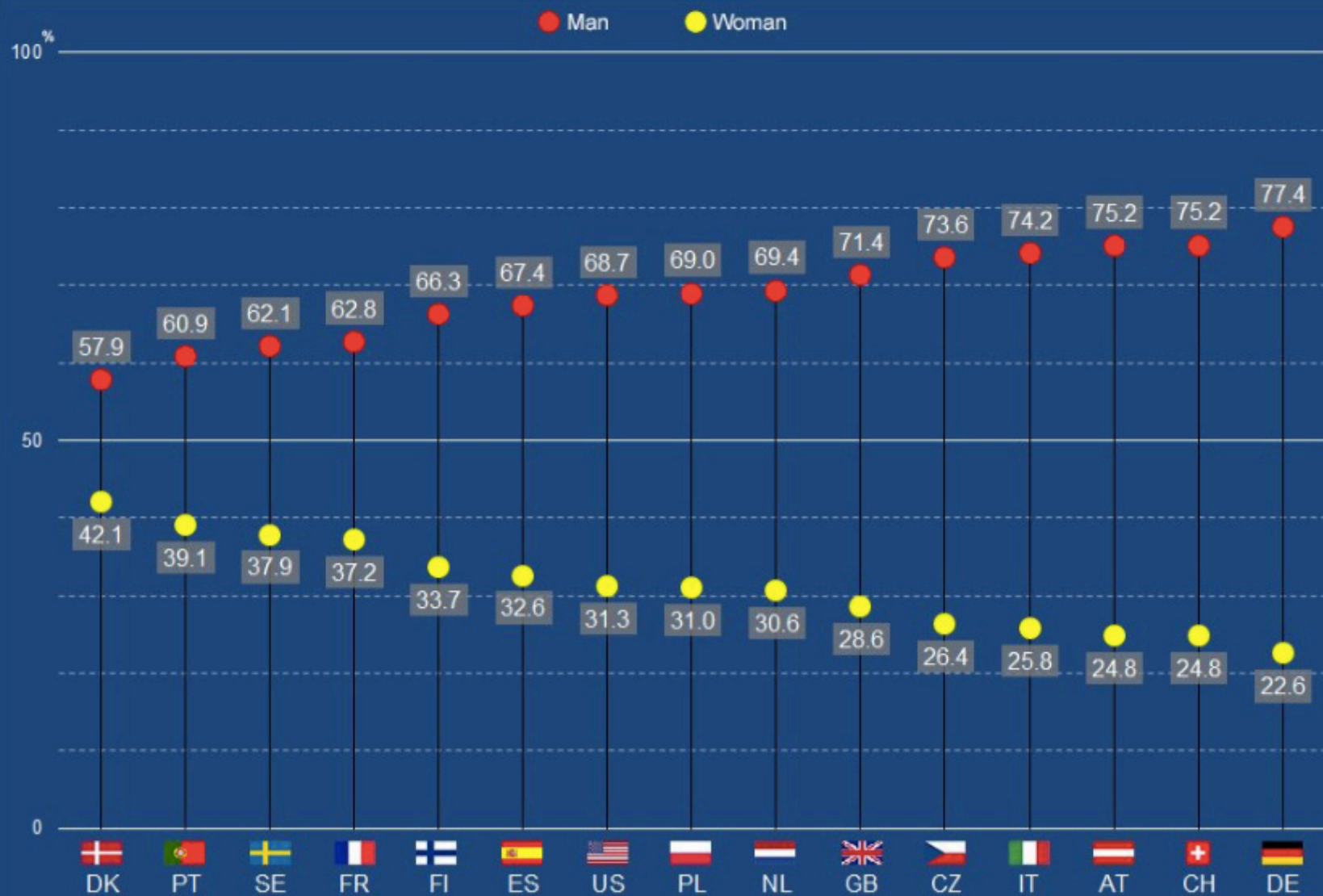
- **England:** an affordability problem (until age 3)
- **Germany:** an availability problem.



# Earnings gap within couples

Average woman's / man's share of a couple's total earnings

Couples with a female partner aged 25 to 45 and at least one child, selected countries, 2011 (2013 for the US)



# Concluding thoughts

- Quality ECEC matters, especially from age three, and especially for children from households with lower education/income or migrant background.
- To an extent policy makers know and act on this, but need to fund commitment to high quality accessible provision properly, especially if children who have most to gain are not to be squeezed out.
- There are also questions that are tricky regardless of funding:
  - How to improve take-up without resorting to compulsion?
  - What mix of qualifications is best?
  - How to ensure curriculum stays child-focused and develops social and emotional skills and a love of learning, when policymakers want to see measurable evidence of progress and 'school-readiness'
- Quality ECEC is not all children need!
  - Importance of Children's Centre model - family support from birth-three and beyond
  - Importance of household financial resources - ensuring an adequate family income through child benefits and maternal employment must also be an integral part of early years policy.